

Dixie Flyer

Take a tour of **Steve Morse's** smokin' Southern steel plant as he churns out a dazzling series of rippin' chicken-pickin' licks, down-home slides and bluesy bends.

BY JIMMY BROWN

STEVE MORSE, ONE of rock's most innovative and well-rounded guitarists, is constantly expanding his musical horizons through diligent study, creative experimentation and prolific output. After finishing recording his latest solo album, *Coast To Coast* (MCA), Morse sat down and shared some of the secrets behind his monstrous technique. This lesson explores but a few of the many aspects of Steve's multi-faceted guitar style and vast technical vocabulary.

ALTERNATE PICKING

The cornerstone of Steve's technical arsenal is his fast, clean *alternate-picking* technique, which enables him to achieve his scorching rock lead attack, fast country popping and rhythmically complex counterpoint. Having made up his mind to perfect his plectrum technique at the tender age of 15, Steve was soon winning bluegrass flatpicking contests and dazzling audiences throughout the Southeast with his extraordinary chops.

To understand the mechanics of Morse's picking technique, we must first take a look at his unorthodox right-hand posture. Morse holds his pick between his thumb, index and middle fingers (Photo A). This three-fingered grip provides him maximum control over the pick and enables him to quickly revert to tapping or touching harmonics with the index finger without having to re-position his hand. Note how he rests his pinky on the front of the guitar. *Anchoring* his pinky this way provides his picking hand with greater stability and a close point of reference. Steve often uses his pinky for volume or tone swells (Photos B and C) and for flicking the pickup selector switches on his custom-designed Ernie Ball/Music Man Steve Morse guitar.

Palm muting is also an integral aspect of Morse's right-hand technique. Muting is what enables the Dixie demon to pick fast, squeaky-clean runs without annoying string noise. Photo D shows Steve's right-hand muting posture. Note how the heel of his palm covers all six strings.

"Practicing through a loud, distorted amp helps remind me of the necessity of muting," Steve says. "I've noticed, however, that when I play with distortion,

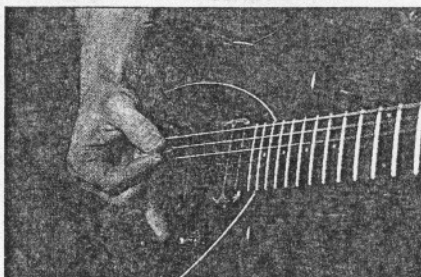


PHOTO A

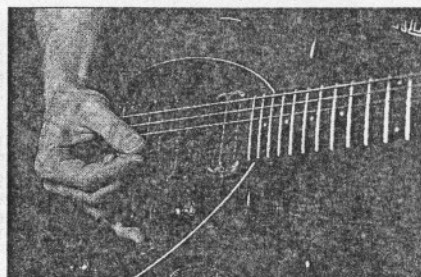


PHOTO B

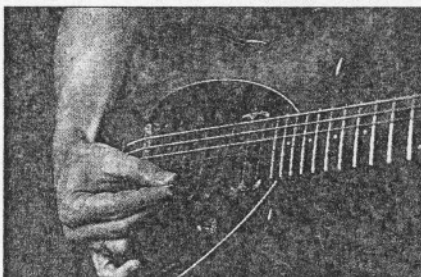


PHOTO C



PHOTO D

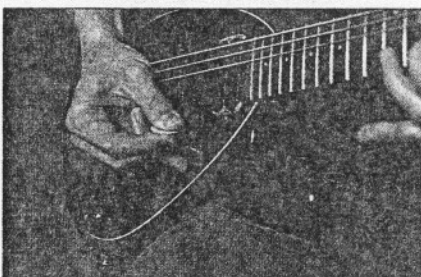


PHOTO E



PHOTO F

I don't have to work as hard to get a good sound. Thus, I tend to become lazy and rely on the amp. I've found that if I practice that way all the time, I don't sound as good when I play clean. That's why I always do a certain amount of practicing with either a clean sound or no amplification."

Morse is very disciplined about practicing, believing that good technique is an essential part of developing and expressing musical ideas. To avoid boredom and to keep his chops fresh, he usually varies his practice regimen daily. "I tend to get bored with mechanical practice, so I change my practice routine all the time. One thing I'll often do is focus on a particular weakness and compose an exercise that will attack the

problem. That helps keep me from getting bored. I do, however, tend to fall back on certain routine warmup exercises, especially when I'm standing around, waiting with my guitar during a sound-check with my volume turned down."

SCALES/ARPEGGIOS

To keep his picking chops in top form, Morse constantly practices scales and arpeggios. "I definitely feel their beneficial effects on my overall speed and ease of execution." Steve backed up his words by systematically tearing through the seven diatonic modes of the A major scale (Fig. 1). Beginning each mode with the index finger on the 6th string, he ascended and descended two octaves across all six strings in a single position, using strict alternate picking. "I nor-

A LESSON WITH STEVE MORSE

anchor, keeping the left hand stable as the fingers repeatedly push and release the string. To maintain his finger strength for bending, Steve does "string pushups" with each individual finger. Photo H shows him bending steel with just his pinky! To bend or shake a note on one of the lower strings, he'll usually pull the string downward, as opposed to pushing it upward.

While on the subject of string bending, Steve played a cool, country-sounding *oblique bend* (Fig. 8, Photo I), fretting an unbent C# note on the 1st string with his pinky while bending a G note on the 2nd string up a whole step with his ring and index fingers. The bright, major sound produced by this bend is characteristic of pedal-steel guitar music. "I've heard Albert Lee play this type of bend many times. The key to making it sound like an authentic country bend is to pluck the strings with your fingers" [Photo J].

FINGERPICKING

More than just a virtuoso flatpicker, Morse is also very skilled at *fingerpick-
ing*, having studied both classical guitar
and banjo; the latter provided the founda-
tion for his chicken-pickin' chops.

"We just recorded a country tune on the new album that's based on a classical-sounding progression," said Steve. He then played a twangy country lick using his bare thumb and fingers to pluck the strings (Fig. 9). Note the sophisticated, classical-sounding chordal movement and use of pedal-steel-like oblique bends—a perfect example of Morse's unique cross-pollination of two completely different styles.



PHOTO I



PHOTO J

FIGURE 2 A MAJOR SCALE FINGERINGS

Beginning on index finger

5th fr.

Beginning on middle finger

5th fr.

picking: $\square \nabla \square \nabla$ etc.
or
 $\nabla \square \nabla \square$ etc.

T
A
B

l.h. fing.

Beginning on ring finger

5th fr.

FIGURE 3 F MAJOR SCALE: ASCENDING SEXTUPLET SEQUENCE

FIGURE 4 STRING-CROSSING EXERCISE

picking: $\square \vee \square \vee \square \vee$
 $\vee \square \vee \square \vee \square$
 or $\square \vee \square \vee \square \vee$
 $\vee \square \vee \square \vee \square$

T
A
B

3
5 7 3 7 5

1h. fing.: 1 2 4 1 4 2

FIGURE 5 D MAJOR-PENTATONIC "BOX" PATTERNS

FIGURE 6

let open D notes ring

T
A
B

photo ref.: (E) (F)

FIGURE 7 REINFORCED BEND/VIBRATO

The musical notation is for the song "Tale of the Blind Men". It features a treble clef, a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody begins on a whole note G4 (first line), followed by a half note A4 (second space), and then a half note B4 (third line). The melody continues with a series of eighth notes: B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C#4, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3, D3, C#3, B2, A2, G2, F#2, E2, D2, C#2, B1, A1, G1, F#1, E1, D1, C#1, B0, A0, G0, F#0, E0, D0, C#0, B-1, A-1, G-1, F#-1, E-1, D-1, C#-1, B-2, A-2, G-2, F#-2, E-2, D-2, C#-2, B-3, A-3, G-3, F#-3, E-3, D-3, C#-3, B-4, A-4, G-4, F#-4, E-4, D-4, C#-4, B-5, A-5, G-5, F#-5, E-5, D-5, C#-5, B-6, A-6, G-6, F#-6, E-6, D-6, C#-6, B-7, A-7, G-7, F#-7, E-7, D-7, C#-7, B-8, A-8, G-8, F#-8, E-8, D-8, C#-8, B-9, A-9, G-9, F#-9, E-9, D-9, C#-9, B-10, A-10, G-10, F#-10, E-10, D-10, C#-10, B-11, A-11, G-11, F#-11, E-11, D-11, C#-11, B-12, A-12, G-12, F#-12, E-12, D-12, C#-12, B-13, A-13, G-13, F#-13, E-13, D-13, C#-13, B-14, A-14, G-14, F#-14, E-14, D-14, C#-14, B-15, A-15, G-15, F#-15, E-15, D-15, C#-15, B-16, A-16, G-16, F#-16, E-16, D-16, C#-16, B-17, A-17, G-17, F#-17, E-17, D-17, C#-17, B-18, A-18, G-18, F#-18, E-18, D-18, C#-18, B-19, A-19, G-19, F#-19, E-19, D-19, C#-19, B-20, A-20, G-20, F#-20, E-20, D-20, C#-20, B-21, A-21, G-21, F#-21, E-21, D-21, C#-21, B-22, A-22, G-22, F#-22, E-22, D-22, C#-22, B-23, A-23, G-23, F#-23, E-23, D-23, C#-23, B-24, A-24, G-24, F#-24, E-24, D-24, C#-24, B-25, A-25, G-25, F#-25, E-25, D-25, C#-25, B-26, A-26, G-26, F#-26, E-26, D-26, C#-26, B-27, A-27, G-27, F#-27, E-27, D-27, C#-27, B-28, A-28, G-28, F#-28, E-28, D-28, C#-28, B-29, A-29, G-29, F#-29, E-29, D-29, C#-29, B-30, A-30, G-30, F#-30, E-30, D-30, C#-30, B-31, A-31, G-31, F#-31, E-31, D-31, C#-31, B-32, A-32, G-32, F#-32, E-32, D-32, C#-32, B-33, A-33, G-33, F#-33, E-33, D-33, C#-33, B-34, A-34, G-34, F#-34, E-34, D-34, C#-34, B-35, A-35, G-35, F#-35, E-35, D-35, C#-35, B-36, A-36, G-36, F#-36, E-36, D-36, C#-36, B-37, A-37, G-37, F#-37, E-37, D-37, C#-37, B-38, A-38, G-38, F#-38, E-38, D-38, C#-38, B-39, A-39, G-39, F#-39, E-39, D-39, C#-39, B-40, A-40, G-40, F#-40, E-40, D-40, C#-40, B-41, A-41, G-41, F#-41, E-41, D-41, C#-41, B-42, A-42, G-42, F#-42, E-42, D-42, C#-42, B-43, A-43, G-43, F#-43, E-43, D-43, C#-43, B-44, A-44, G-44, F#-44, E-44, D-44, C#-44, B-45, A-45, G-45, F#-45, E-45, D-45, C#-45, B-46, A-46, G-46, F#-46, E-46, D-46, C#-46, B-47, A-47, G-47, F#-47, E-47, D-47, C#-47, B-48, A-48, G-48, F#-48, E-48, D-48, C#-48, B-49, A-49, G-49, F#-49, E-49, D-49, C#-49, B-50, A-50, G-50, F#-50, E-50, D-50, C#-50, B-51, A-51, G-51, F#-51, E-51, D-51, C#-51, B-52, A-52, G-52, F#-52, E-52, D-52, C#-52, B-53, A-53, G-53, F#-53, E-53, D-53, C#-53, B-54, A-54, G-54, F#-54, E-54, D-54, C#-54, B-55, A-55, G-55, F#-55, E-55, D-55, C#-55, B-56, A-56, G-56, F#-56, E-56, D-56, C#-56, B-57, A-57, G-57, F#-57, E-57, D-57, C#-57, B-58, A-58, G-58, F#-58, E-58, D-58, C#-58, B-59, A-59, G-59, F#-59, E-59, D-59, C#-59, B-60, A-60, G-60, F#-60, E-60, D-60, C#-60, B-61, A-61, G-61, F#-61, E-61, D-61, C#-61, B-62, A-62, G-62, F#-62, E-62, D-62, C#-62, B-63, A-63, G-63, F#-63, E-63, D-63, C#-63, B-64, A-64, G-64, F#-64, E-64, D-64, C#-64, B-65, A-65, G-65, F#-65, E-65, D-65, C#-65, B-66, A-66, G-66, F#-66, E-66, D-66, C#-66, B-67, A-67, G-67, F#-67, E-67, D-67, C#-67, B-68, A-68, G-68, F#-68, E-68, D-68, C#-68, B-69, A-69, G-69, F#-69, E-69, D-69, C#-69, B-70, A-70, G-70, F#-70, E-70, D-70, C#-70, B-71, A-71, G-71, F#-71, E-71, D-71, C#-71, B-72, A-72, G-72, F#-72, E-72, D-72, C#-72, B-73, A-73, G-73, F#-73, E-73, D-73, C#-73, B-74, A-74, G-74, F#-74, E-74, D-74, C#-74, B-75, A-75, G-75, F#-75, E-75, D-75, C#-75, B-76, A-76, G-76, F#-76, E-76, D-76, C#-76, B-77, A-77, G-77, F#-77, E-77, D-77, C#-77, B-78, A-78, G-78, F#-78, E-78, D-78, C#-78, B-79, A-79, G-79, F#-79, E-79, D-79, C#-79, B-80, A-80, G-80, F#-80, E-80, D-80, C#-80, B-81, A-81, G-81, F#-81, E-81, D-81, C#-81, B-82, A-82, G-82, F#-82, E-82, D-82, C#-82, B-83, A-83, G-83, F#-83, E-83, D-83, C#-83, B-84, A-84, G-84, F#-84, E-84, D-84, C#-84, B-85, A-85, G-85, F#-85, E-85, D-85, C#-85, B-86, A-86, G-86, F#-86, E-86, D-86, C#-86, B-87, A-87, G-87, F#-87, E-87, D-87, C#-87, B-88, A-88, G-88, F#-88, E-88, D-88, C#-88, B-89, A-89, G-89, F#-89, E-89, D-89, C#-89, B-90, A-90, G-90, F#-90, E-90, D-90, C#-90, B-91, A-91, G-91, F#-91, E-91, D-91, C#-91, B-92, A-92, G-92, F#-92, E-92, D-92, C#-92, B-93, A-93, G-93, F#-93, E-93, D-93, C#-93, B-94, A-94, G-94, F#-94, E-94, D-94, C#-94, B-95, A-95, G-95, F#-95, E-95, D-95, C#-95, B-96, A-96, G-96, F#-96, E-96, D-96, C#-96, B-97, A-97, G-97, F#-97, E-97, D-97, C#-97, B-98, A-98, G-98, F#-98, E-98, D-98, C#-98, B-99, A-99, G-99, F#-99, E-99, D-99, C#-99, B-100, A-100, G-100, F#-100, E-100, D-100, C#-100, B-101, A-101, G-101, F#-101, E-101, D-101, C#-101, B-102, A-102, G-102, F#-102, E-102, D-102, C#-102, B-103, A-103, G-103, F#-103, E-103, D-103, C#-103, B-104, A-104, G-104, F#-104, E-104, D-104, C#-104, B-105, A-105, G-105, F#-105, E-105, D-105, C#-105, B-10

FIGURE 8 OBLIQUE BEND

The first measure of the song is written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The melody consists of a quarter note G4 (labeled 'ke'), followed by a quarter rest, and then a half note G4 (labeled 'B'). Below the staff, the lyrics 'T', 'A', and 'B' are aligned with the notes. A 'full' bar line is indicated by an arrow pointing to the end of the measure.

FIGURE 9 "CHICKEN-PICKIN'" LICK

The image displays a musical score for the song "The Wind" by The Beatles. It includes a guitar part with a treble clef and a bass part with a bass clef. The guitar part features a melody with various chords (D, F, C, G, D, A, Bb, F, C, G, D) and includes a "fingerstyle full" instruction. The bass part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with a "full" instruction. Both parts include a tablature line with fret numbers (e.g., 10, 10, 10, 8, 8, 8, 7, 6, 7, 7, 6, 5, 5). The score is divided into two systems, each with a key signature change indicated by a flat symbol (Bb) for the second system. The guitar part in the second system includes a "let ring" instruction. The bass part in the second system includes a "full" instruction. The score is presented in a clear, legible format with a white background and black text and notation.

FIGURE 10

FIGURE 10

N.C.
(A)

full
(B)

1/4

h. fing.:

1 1 3 (2) 1 3 1 2 1 3 2 2 2 4 1 2 3 2 1 2 1

FIGURE 11

Fast Shuffle Feel

[illegible]

FIGURE 12 ARPEGGIO EXERCISE

The musical score for "The Wind" by The Beatles is presented in two systems. The first system includes a guitar part with a melody line and a bass part with a bass line. The guitar part features a variety of chords: N.C., (Am), (G# dim7), (Am), (G), (Fadd9), (D# dim7), and (E7). The bass part includes a picking pattern (square, V, square, V) and a fingering sequence (3, 4, 1, 4, 3, 2, 4, 1, 4, 1, 4, 2, 4, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 4, 1, 2, 1, 1, 4, 1, 1, 1, 3, 1, 1, 1, 4, 1, 1, 1, 4, 1, 4, 1, 4, 2, 1, 2, 4, 1, 2, 3). The second system continues the guitar and bass parts with chords (Am), (G# dim7), (F), (Cadd9), and (Dadd9). The guitar part includes a 4-note group and a 4-note group. The bass part includes a 4-note group, a 4-note group, a 4-note group, a 4-note group, a 4-note group, and a 4-note group. The score is written in 4/4 time and includes a key signature of one sharp (F#).

SOLOING

Morse will often employ notes from several different scales within a single phrase when soloing over a rock or country groove. He demonstrated this approach by playing a bluesy lick in the key of A (Fig. 10). Steve used notes from three different scales—A major blues (A, B, C, C#, E, F#), A minor blues (A, C, D, Eb, E, G) and A Mixolydian (A, B, C#, D, E, F#, G)—to create this funky, “down-home” phrase. Note the very angular melodic contour and soulful use of vibrato.

Figure 11 is a rippin' blues lick Steve plays in the key of F, similar to one heard in "Cut To The Chase" (*Southern Steel*). This example showcases several of his trademark soloing maneuvers. Note the use of chromatic passing tones (bars 2 and 3), wide intervallic skips (bar 3), reinforced bending (bar 1) and a wicked vibrato (bar 4).

Steve concluded our lesson with an example in a completely different vein—neoclassical rock. Figure 12 depicts a rapid-fire arpeggio exercise he performs in the key of A minor. Steve used a similar exercise as the basis for the melody to “Tumeni Notes” (*High Tension Wires*). The example further illustrates Morse’s harmonic and rhythmic sophistication and broad stylistic range. I’ve included picking strokes above the tablature to guide you. Practice this exercise slowly with a metronome until you can play every note cleanly and with conviction.

These are but a few of the many playing techniques in Steve's arsenal. For more information about his multi-faceted guitar style and compositional approach, check out his three instructional videos: *Power Lines* (REH), *Steve Morse With The Steve Morse Band* (DCI) and *The Essential Steve Morse* (DCI). ●

A LESSON WITH STEVE MORSE

FIGURE 9 "CHICKEN-PICKIN'" LICK

FIGURE 10

N.C.
(A)

1 1 3 (2) 1 3 1 2 1 3 2 2 2 4 1 2 3 2 1 2 1

FIGURE 11

Fast Shuffle Feel

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